Under my skin

ASHFORD SERIE

BOOK ONE

CINDY H. A.

Copyright © 2026 by Cindy H. A.

ISBN Paperback 9798160641263

Cover character art by @draawgon

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for brief quotations used in a book review.

PROHIBITION ON AI USE

Uploading the cover, illustrations, design, or any part of this book's text to AI systems or AI-powered services is strictly prohibited, as is processing or otherwise using this material through such systems or services. This also applies to screenshots, photographs, scans, quotations, excerpts, and adaptations.

No part of this work may be used for AI training, prompts, analysis, imitation, modification, or the creation of new or derivative content without prior, explicit written permission from the author and, where applicable, the illustrator.

All rights reserved.

For every woman who ever felt
she had to make herself smaller
so someone else could feel bigger.
For every woman who lost her voice
and found the courage to reclaim it.
For every woman who learned
that love should never mean ownership.
And for every woman who finally discovered
that her strength had been there all along.
This story is for you.

Triggerwarning

Under My Skin is intended for adult readers and explores serious, potentially distressing themes. The story includes:

- Emotional manipulation, gaslighting, humiliation, and psychological abuse
- Controlling and coercive behavior, jealousy, isolation, intimidation, and threats
- Domestic and relationship violence
- Physical violence and abuse within a relationship
- Sexual coercion, sexual violence, and violations of personal boundaries within a relationship
- Sexual harassment, threats of sexual violence, and attempted sexual assault
- Trauma, trauma responses, panic attacks, dissociation, and flashbacks
- A passive wish to die, self-sacrificing behavior, and deliberately entering life-threatening situations
- Child abuse, parental neglect, alcohol abuse, and the loss of a parent
- Drug addiction, misuse of medication, relapse, gambling addiction, and unmanageable debt
- Blackmail, stalking, kidnapping, hostage situations, and threats against loved ones
- Forced participation in illegal fights and match-fixing
- Graphic descriptions of fights, blood, and severe physical injuries
- Knife and gun violence, a shooting, and attempted murder
- Resuscitation, medical emergencies, hospitalization, and coma
- Explicit, consensual sex scenes
- Strong language

Some scenes are described in detail from the perspectives of the characters involved. These scenes may be distressing or emotionally difficult to read, especially if you have experienced something similar.

Please take care of yourself while reading. You can always skip a passage, put the book down for a while, or stop reading altogether if the story feels too close to home. Your well-being matters more than finishing a book.

This story is very close to my heart. If it brings up feelings or experiences you would like to share with me, you can always reach out on Instagram at **@auteur_cindy_h.a**. I will read your message when I can, but

please remember that I am not a mental health professional and cannot provide immediate support.

If you need help or are in an unsafe situation, please contact a professional support service:

Belgium

For concerns about violence, abuse, or child abuse, you can contact **Helpline 1712** free of charge and anonymously. The phone line is open Monday to Friday, from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. You can email at any time, and current chat hours are listed at **www.1712.be**.

If you are in immediate danger, call the police on **101**. For emergency medical assistance, call **112**.

The Netherlands

Veilig Thuis offers free, anonymous support around the clock on **0800-2000**. You can also visit **www.veiligthuis.nl**.

International support

If you live outside Belgium or the Netherlands, the following websites can help you find support in your country:

Lila.help — www.lila.help A global directory of helplines and support organizations for people experiencing domestic or sexual violence. lila.help

Find A Helpline — www.findahelpline.com Find verified helplines by country and topic, including emotional distress, abuse, trauma, addiction, and suicidal thoughts. Free, 24/7 Chat, Text ...

IF YOU ARE IN IMMEDIATE DANGER OR NEED URGENT MEDICAL HELP, CALL YOUR LOCAL EMERGENCY NUMBER.

Wherever you are, you do not have to face this alone.

DRIVE-IN

CHAPTER
One

AVA

"We'll always have Paris. We didn't have… we'd lost it until you came to Casablanca. We got it back last night."

The words linger as the plane's engines rumble in the background. The yellowed movie screen lights up the grounds in flickering shades of white and gray.

Rick takes in every detail of Ilsa's face. His gaze stays on her, longing for one more second, one more memory to hold on to before she leaves his life forever.

It gets to me every time. Not because they're saying goodbye, but because you can see in their eyes how hard it is to make that choice. There's nothing shallow about their heartbreak, nothing forced about the emotion. Just two people who love each other and know they can't be together. This is real pain. The kind that comes from loving someone and knowing that letting them go is the only right choice.

"The problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world—"

With a sigh, I close my laptop.

Two hours.

Two hours spent staring at the same blank document, writing sentences only to delete them again. I'd hoped a change of scenery would help me get past my writer's block.

No such luck.

I set my laptop beside me on the roof of the car and lean back on my elbows. My gaze stays on the screen as the plane slowly disappears into the clouds. The breeze brushes my face, and for once, I try to clear my mind. I take a deep breath and—

"That has to be the most depressing movie ever made."

My eyes fly open.

"You know they don't end up together, right?"

I sit up abruptly, looking for whoever spoke. At the edge of the lot, beside the abandoned snack bar, a man leans against the crumbling wall. I

have no idea how long he's been standing there. *Apparently long enough to know what's playing and scare the hell out of me.*

"Jesus." My hand flies to my chest. "What's wrong with you?"

One corner of his mouth lifts. "That's a pretty broad question." His gaze moves over me, briefly settling on the laptop beside me and the crumpled notes scattered across the roof.

"Normal people don't sneak up on strangers and scare the hell out of them."

"Sneak up?" He raises an eyebrow. "That sounds a lot more dramatic than what actually happened."

"You literally appeared out of nowhere."

"Normal people don't watch movies at abandoned drive-ins, either."

He has a point.

This place must have been packed every night once. Now the yellowed screen is covered in tears, weeds grow through the cracked asphalt, and the old speaker posts lean as if they could topple over at any moment.

Ever since I discovered this place almost a year ago, I've come here whenever there's too much going on in my head. The first time, I barely dared to get out of the car. Afterward, I looked up more information about the place at home and came back the following evening. To my surprise, the building still had power, and the old projector came to life without a problem as soon as I pressed the start button.

I've switched it on every time I've come here since.

Always the same movie.

Casablanca.

I open my mouth to answer, then close it again. One look at his smug face tells me everything I need to know. He's clearly the type who always has to have the last word. As I slip my laptop into my bag, I can't help watching him. Only now do I notice how much he's leaning on the wall. At first, I thought he was just standing casually, but the longer I look, the less sure I am. His shoulders are tense, one hand pressed against his side, and almost all his weight rests on the opposite leg.

My mind is screaming at me to get back in the car.

A strange man.

An abandoned drive-in.

The middle of the night.

Everything about this situation tells me to leave as fast as I can.

But my curiosity has always had an annoying way of winning out over my common sense.

My gaze catches on his T-shirt. Just above his hip, a dark stain is slowly

spreading. Even in the faint light from the old movie screen, where the credits are now rolling, I recognize the color immediately.

"You're bleeding."

His gaze drops briefly to the spreading stain.

"Very observant."

I keep looking at him.

Should I just leave?

That would probably be the sensible thing to do. Take out my phone, call 911, and drive away.

But he stays where he is. No threatening movements. No steps toward me. Just that stubborn look.

"Okay…" I glance at his side again. "And that doesn't bother you?"

He shrugs.

"Not really."

My frown deepens.

His answer doesn't match what I'm seeing. The dark stain on his T-shirt keeps spreading, and the tension in his body gives away more than he probably realizes.

"It looks pretty serious."

He gives me a faint, humorless smile. "You're here alone in the middle of the night, at a drive-in no one's used in years. I don't think I'm the only one who's made a few bad decisions today."

"Like sneaking up behind a woman while you're bleeding?" I fold my arms. "Maybe I shouldn't be here, but neither should you."

"I'm not the one taking the biggest risk here."

I frown. "That's your defense?"

The corner of his mouth lifts again. "A defense would imply I owe you an explanation."

"You're bleeding. I'd say that's pretty unusual."

"You already mentioned that."

As if he expects me to get tired of this eventually.

Too bad for him.

That's not really my style.

I let out a sigh. "Asshole," I mutter. Before I can say anything else, my phone rings in my back pocket.

Ruben.

I smile without even thinking. "Hey, love."

"There you are." His voice is warm, but there's something underneath it I can't quite place. "I was starting to wonder if you were ignoring me."

I laugh softly. "Of course not. My phone was on Do Not Disturb. I was writing, but—"

"Food."

I blink. "Sorry?"

"Have you eaten?"

I don't answer, and I hear him sigh on the other end of the line.

"Babe, you need to eat. You can't live on coffee and stubbornness."

"I've managed it for years."

"And I've been worrying about it for years."

I can't help laughing. My gaze drifts back to the stranger. He's still standing by the railing, as if he has no intention of going anywhere.

"So?" Ruben asks. "How bad is it?"

I rest my head against the car window for a moment. "Let's just say my characters are being as stubborn as I am today."

"That sounds like a nightmare."

"It is."

"Just come home."

My smile widens a little. "I haven't been gone that long, have I? Do you miss me already?"

"It's been over two hours. And you've probably spent the whole time staring at a blank screen. I think that earns me the right to try to talk you into coming home."

I shake my head, amused. "I'll be home soon, babe."

"Good." There's a brief silence on the other end. "I love you, Ava."

I glance at the stranger again. "Yeah." A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. "I love you too."

I end the call and slip my phone back into my pocket.

"Sounds like someone's worried about you."

I ignore the comment.

This man has clearly decided that every question deserves an argument and every comment is a challenge. I grab my bag from the hood and walk to the driver's door. Two more seconds, and this whole strange encounter will be nothing more than a story I can tell later.

I catch movement out of the corner of my eye, and my gaze follows him before I can help it. At the edge of the lot, a black motorcycle is parked among the bushes. No, he can't be serious. My frown deepens as he swings a leg over the seat.

"You're not seriously going to ride that?" The words are out before I can stop them.

He looks up as he takes his helmet off the handlebars. "Your powers of observation never cease to amaze me."

Before I can answer, the engine starts with a low growl. The headlight comes on, casting long shadows across the abandoned lot. His tail-

light disappears between the trees, leaving nothing but silence and darkness.

I shake my head, pull open the car door, and toss my bag onto the passenger seat. What an asshole. Still, the image of that dark stain on his T-shirt lingers in my mind as I start the car. Only when the city lights come into view do I force myself to stop thinking about it.



By the time I close the front door behind me, it's almost midnight. The familiar warmth of the house wraps around me.

"Ruben?"

"In the living room."

I smile at the sound of his voice and kick off my shoes. When I walk into the living room, he's sitting on the couch with his ankles crossed on the coffee table. Papers are spread out in front of him as he grades essays with a red pen.

"You know normal people watch movies or sleep at this hour?" I ask.

"You know normal people don't spend two hours staring at a blank document at this hour?"

I drop onto the couch beside him, and he drapes an arm around my shoulders so I can settle against him. "Funny."

"It's one of the reasons I'm so popular on campus."

"Keep telling yourself that, Mr. Calloway."

He laughs softly and kisses my hair. I close my eyes for a moment.

"So." He puts down his red pen. "How many words?"

I groan. "Do we really have to have this conversation?"

"Yes, Ava."

"Why?"

"Because otherwise you'll pretend there isn't a problem."

My head rests against his shoulder. "I don't do that."

"Last time, you spent three days pretending there wasn't a problem."

"That was one time!"

"Your agent called you seven times."

"Six!"

"My point still stands." He sets his pen on the table. "I told you I was worried when you signed with them."

I roll my eyes. "Here we go again."

"I'm just worried about you."

"I know."

"Sometimes I wonder if you do." He sighs, pushes his glasses up onto his forehead, and rubs the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "I'm not saying it was a bad decision."

He always says that.

"But?"

"But I still think they expect too much of you." His hand slides along my arm. "I just don't want you to push yourself too hard."

Maybe he's right. We'll probably never completely agree about the publisher, but we both know I sometimes lose myself in my work. His fingers move slowly through my hair as silence settles between us.

I nod toward the stack of papers beside him. "How many literary masterpieces have you got there?"

He lets out a dry laugh. "According to one student, Romeo and Juliet is mostly a story about poor communication."

I raise an eyebrow. "She's not entirely wrong."

"She thinks they could have solved their problems with a group chat."

I burst out laughing, and a smug grin spreads across his face.

"There she is."

I frown. "Who?"

"My girlfriend." He puts down his pen. "The one who hasn't spent the last two days fighting with her manuscript."

He tosses the essay onto the side table and pulls me onto his lap.

I close my eyes as his lips touch my neck.

"Ruben," I murmur, though there's little conviction in my voice.

"What?" he asks against my skin.

My fingers slide through his hair as his hands slip beneath my T-shirt. "I really need to get back to—"

He cuts me off with a deep kiss, and before I know it, I'm lying back on the couch with Ruben above me.

His attention is entirely on me, yet somehow it isn't. His hands move over my body with practiced ease, but none of it feels like a question. He takes everything for granted, as though my response barely matters. For a moment, my mind tries to hold on to the manuscript—the sentence I almost had, the word I was looking for—but eventually gives up.

He moves my clothes aside and slowly pushes into me, his eyes closed, lost in himself. My body adjusts before I'm fully aware of it. His hands grip my hips, and I realize I'm following his rhythm rather than helping set it.

Just as my body finally starts to find its own rhythm, his movements

change. They grow uneven. His body tenses, and a quiet groan escapes him.

Then everything stops.

He stays pressed against me for a while, his head heavy on my shoulder as he catches his breath.

I don't move. Maybe he can still feel it—the tension in my body, the sense that this isn't finished. Maybe he'll turn toward me in a moment. Maybe he'll notice after all.

I run my fingers absently through his hair and wait for his breathing to settle. Eventually, he lifts his head and gives me a gentle kiss. He looks at me with a satisfied smile. My thoughts are still on my manuscript.

"It's been a long day," he says, holding out his hand. "Coming?"

I shake my head. "I want to try writing a little more."

His hand rests on my leg for another moment before he slowly pulls it away.

I know that look.

The one that says he doesn't agree.

That he already knows I'll complain tomorrow morning about not getting enough sleep. Still, he says nothing. He straightens his T-shirt, fastens his pants, and picks up the stack of papers from the side table.

"Ruben…"

He looks up as he slides his glasses back onto his nose. For a second, I think he's going to start again about sleep, deadlines, or how hard I'm pushing myself. Instead, he just shakes his head.

"Good night, Ava." His voice is soft, but I hear the undertone. He isn't happy about this.

I give him an innocent smile, but that only makes it worse.

Only when the bedroom door closes do I move and reach for my laptop.

The screen lights up as I open it, greeting me with the same document that's been haunting me for days. The cursor blinks impatiently in the middle of the page, waiting for something I apparently can't give it. My fingers hover over the keyboard as I stare at the blank screen.

Come on.

One sentence.

That's all I'm asking of myself. Not a whole chapter. Not some brilliant idea that fixes everything. Just one sentence good enough to give me somewhere to start.

The minutes crawl by as I stare at the screen.

With a frustrated sigh, I close my eyes for a moment.

Maybe Ruben was right. Maybe I'm tired. Maybe I'm trying so hard to force a story that I've forgotten why I wanted to write it in the first place.

When I open my eyes again, I no longer see a blank document. I see an arrogant, bleeding man climbing onto his motorcycle without a second thought, as if common sense has never been part of his vocabulary.

I let out an exasperated laugh. What an asshole.

My fingers settle on the keyboard, and before I know it, the first words appear on the screen. By the time I look up again, it's four in the morning, and I finally have the beginning of my new story.

CHAPTER
Two

CALEB

The door slams shut behind me. I rest my forehead against the wood. The adrenaline that kept me on my feet during the fight is slowly wearing off, leaving a sharp, burning pain behind.

"Goddamn it."

I reluctantly limp to the bathroom. Slowly, I pull my T-shirt over my head and toss it into the sink.

The mirror doesn't lie.

A deep purple bruise spreads across my left side, reaching just below my ribs. Several cuts mark the discolored skin in jagged red lines. Some are barely more than scratches. Others are deep enough that they started bleeding again during the ride.

Fucking Reaper.

Everyone knows the rules of the Underground. You enter the ring with your fists. You leave on your own two feet or get carried out. That's how it works, but that psycho clearly had other ideas and decked out his boxing gloves with razor-sharp blades.

With a sigh, I turn on the tap and wet a towel with cold water. The moment it touches my skin, I clench my jaw and hiss. *Fuck.* That piece of shit is lucky security held me back. Otherwise, he would've left the Underground in a coffin.

Twenty minutes later, I drop onto the couch with an ice pack against my side, having swallowed two painkillers. The silence in my apartment feels so good that my eyes begin to close. Then someone pounds on the door.

I ignore it.

"I know you're home, Caleb. Your bike's outside the gym!"

Ethan. Of course.

For a moment, I consider leaving him out there. He's my best friend, but he's never understood when to leave someone alone.

"Open the door, Caleb, or I'm breaking it down!"

I roll my eyes, haul myself up with a heavy sigh, and limp to the door. The moment I open it, Ethan and Sienna walk in as if they're welcome. My mood immediately gets worse.

"No." That's all I say. Neither of them seems to care. "I'm alive. You can leave now."

She's the last person I want here.

"I'll decide that once I've seen the damage," Sienna says, sitting down. She pats the seat beside her. "Come sit."

I look at Ethan. "Why is she here?" I ask irritably.

"Because Ethan didn't have a choice," Sienna answers before he can open his mouth.

Ethan shrugs. *Softy.*

"Sit."

"Not a chance."

"Caleb."

"Sienna."

She raises an eyebrow. Ever since that night a few weeks ago, she's been acting like there's unfinished business between us. No matter how many times I tell her it was a one-time thing, she doesn't seem to get it. One of the worst decisions I've ever made. The fact that she's a cage girl and I see her at every fucking fight doesn't help.

Ethan looks between us. "Don't bother, Cal. Give her what she wants. She'll leave sooner."

With an irritated sigh, I drop onto the couch beside her. She immediately takes hold of my chin and turns my face toward the light.

"Ow. Take it easy."

"I haven't even touched the wound yet." Then her gaze drops to my side. The amusement vanishes from her face. "Jesus, Caleb. Any deeper and you wouldn't be sitting here snapping at me."

"It's not that bad."

"Stop it." Her fingers move carefully along the edge of one of the cuts as she examines the damage. "Seriously, Caleb. You got lucky."

"And that surprises you?"

"You need to go to a hospital."

I let out a dry laugh. "And tell them what? That I was in an illegal fight with some idiot who put razor blades in his boxing gloves?"

Ethan leans back on the couch. "Yeah, when you put it like that, it doesn't sound great."

"They'll call the cops. Then what?" I push her hand away and press the ice pack against the bruise again. "It's stopped bleeding. All I'll get is a scar."

"I can clean it up for you—"

"Goodbye, Sienna."

She narrows her eyes and stares at me. Eventually, she shakes her head. "You're an asshole, Caleb."

That woman at the drive-in called me the same thing an hour ago. "I've heard that a few times today."

She gives me a murderous look. "Believe me, I'm not surprised." With an irritated sigh, she grabs her bag from the coffee table. "Suit yourself."

"That was the plan."

She turns and storms toward the door.

"Don't slam the—"

BAM.

The front door slams before Ethan can finish. He lets out a heavy sigh and sinks back into the couch.

I shake my head. "What the hell were you thinking, bringing her here? You know how I feel about her."

Ethan raises an eyebrow. "And how's that?"

"She's fucking annoying."

"Pot, meet kettle."

I roll my eyes and ignore him, but he keeps staring at me in disbelief. "Why are you looking at me like that?" I ask.

Ethan rests his head against the back of the couch. "Because that was way too close tonight."

I roll my eyes again. "Here we go."

"Seriously, Caleb. I mean it." His usual grin is gone. "When I saw all that blood, I thought the bastard had hit an artery."

My jaw tightens at the memory of that first uppercut with those fucking gloves. "He should never have been allowed in the ring wearing those."

"I know."

"What happened to the checks?" Everyone gets checked before they enter the cage. Reaper didn't just slip through. Someone let this happen.

"Ask Vince."

"I will." For a few seconds, neither of us speaks. Then I shift the ice pack against my side. "How much?"

"You're unbelievable," Ethan sighs.

"How much?" I press.

"Nine thousand."

My eyebrows shoot up. *Shit.* I've never won that much. "Seriously?"

He shrugs again, then pulls an envelope from his back pocket. "Reaper was the favorite."

"That explains a lot."

"Caleb."

I look up. Ethan stares at me as though he's trying to figure something out.

"He's not worth it. He's already cost you enough."

My gaze drops to the bruise on my side.

Nine thousand dollars, two fights, one night. But it's still not enough.

"I'll decide that for myself."

Ethan holds my gaze for a few more seconds, then shakes his head. "Fine." He clearly disagrees, but he also knows there's no point arguing. "Where did you disappear to after the fight, anyway?"

I drop the ice pack onto the table, take the envelope, and slide it unopened into the drawer with the others. "Just went for a ride."

"With that wound?" he asks in disbelief.

"Apparently."

"You really do have a death wish."

The image of that woman at the drive-in comes back to me before I can stop it. What the hell was she doing alone at an abandoned drive-in in the middle of the night?

"Caleb?"

I look up.

He narrows his eyes. "I know that look."

"Whatever."

"Who was she?"

My gaze snaps back to him. "What?"

"There was a woman, wasn't there?"

Fuck. "You're imagining things."

"Sure."

I throw a boxing glove at his head. He catches it, laughing.

"Six thirty," he says as he gets up. "Don't forget the gym opens tomorrow." He walks to the door. "You know. *Your* gym."

My gaze shifts to the clock on the wall. *Shit.* Iron & Edge opens for the first time in less than three hours.

CHAPTER
Three

AVA

I haven't even taken off my coat when a familiar four-legged friend leans against me.

"Hey, buddy. I'm happy to see you too."

Fable looks at me as if I've left him alone for months instead of hours. As I scratch behind the ears of the world's cutest puppy, I glance around the café.

The afternoon rush has taken over After Words. Students sit among towers of textbooks, and someone is typing intently on a laptop. Behind the bar, Tess makes drinks while trying to win a heated argument about a romantasy novel.

"I swear, if that author kills off one more character in the next book and calls it character development, I'm flying out there myself."

"That sounds like a reasonable response."

Tess looks up from behind the bar, her face lighting up when she sees me. "Finally. I was starting to think your man had locked you up."

"Good afternoon to you too." I walk behind the bar and hang my coat on a hook.

"Forget good afternoon." Tess sets down a glass and points her cocktail shaker at me accusingly. "Please tell me you finally got something written."

I groan softly.

"Ava."

"Tess."

She throws her head back. "I need a new book to promote with an embarrassing amount of enthusiasm. My entire personality is recommending your old books to unsuspecting customers."

"Sounds like a hard life."

"It is a hard life." She presses a hand to her chest. "Do you know how many people I've convinced this week that they absolutely need a signed copy?"

"None?"

"Forty-three."

I freeze. "You're kidding!"

"Yes." She grins. "But it was a lot."

Fable drops at my feet with a sigh, as if even he's used to her theatrics.

"So? How many words today?"

I don't answer, and her cheerful expression immediately fades.

"Oh, Ava. I'm sure something will—"

"I've made a start," I interrupt, and her smile returns at once.

"Really? Let me read it."

I shake my head. "You know better than that. Nobody reads it until I'm happy with it. It's only a first draft."

She pouts. "Then at least tell me there's a hot man in it. Seriously, Ava. I need a new book boyfriend."

She hands the cocktail she's been making to a customer, complete with the beaming smile that probably does more for her tip jar than her excellent drinks menu. "Ever since that new gym opened across the street, this place has been crawling with muscular men."

"And yet you're still single."

"Because muscles aren't enough."

"That's surprisingly deep for you."

"I know." She takes some empty glasses from a customer sitting at the bar. "They also need to be able to read. Maybe you should go have a look around that gym."

"And do what?"

"I don't know. Trip over a dumbbell? Pick up a man? Find some inspiration?"

I laugh. "I'll leave the flirting to you."

"Probably for the best." She gives me a pointed look. "I don't entirely trust your taste in men."

"You only say that because you don't like Ruben."

Tess shrugs. "I just think he's… a lot."

"A lot?"

"A lot of professor."

I roll my eyes. "That doesn't even make sense. He… takes care of me."

"See? That's what I mean." She shakes her head. "You're defending him when I haven't even said anything."

"Because we've had this conversation before."

The corners of her mouth lift. "Maybe." She turns and gives the student working behind the bar a few instructions so she can finally take her lunch break. "Come on, girl." She unties her apron and tosses it onto the counter. "We're getting something to eat, and you're telling me all about that new manuscript."

Ten minutes later, we're sitting at a table by the window. Tess rests her chin on her hand while I try to explain what's been going through my head.

“I haven’t figured it all out yet,” I admit. “But I think I want to write something different.”

“Different how?”

I look down at my plate. “Not fantasy. Something more… real. No dragons, no magic, no kingdoms to save.” I shrug. “Just people.”

“People are awful.”

“Exactly.”

That earns me a grin.

“I don’t know. Maybe some kind of romance, but nothing too sweet.”

“Romance? Without all the feel-good stuff?” Her eyes light up.

“I’m thinking about a woman who’s stuck in a life she isn’t happy with. She slowly starts losing herself, until she meets someone who’s everything she should stay away from.”

Tess goes quiet.

“Someone who brings trouble, who isn’t exactly a good person, but makes her feel alive. And the closer she gets to him, the more her carefully built life starts falling apart.” I shrug. “Something like that. I don’t know yet.”

Tess stares at me, her mouth open. She blinks a few times in disbelief. “You’re not writing fantasy? What does Eleanor think?”

“No idea. I think at this point she’ll just be happy I’ve written anything at all.”

A loud clatter comes from across the café. A tray hits the floor, followed by some colorful swearing from one of the students.

I automatically push my chair back. “I’ll go help.”

“Stay put.”

I look up.

Tess points her spoon at me. “I mean it, Ava. If I catch you behind the bar later, I’m sending you straight home.”

“Tess.”

“No arguments.” Her expression softens. “You’ve finally got your inspiration back. I’m not letting you waste it pouring coffee.”

“You’re not distracting me, Tess.”

She smiles. “Good. Then stay here, let us take care of you, and write.”

I laugh. “That sounds suspiciously like an order.”

“It is. I want to read at least the first few chapters by the end of the week.”

“You know I never let anyone read anything until—”

“Until you’re happy with it. Yes, yes. I know that speech by heart.” She gestures toward the window. “And if you need inspiration, just look around. There’s enough eye candy here these days to fill ten books.”

"Eye candy?"

"Eye candy."

I shake my head but follow her gaze outside. Across the street, people come and go at Iron & Edge. Some have gym bags slung over their shoulders. Others emerge sweaty, water bottles in hand. Young, old, muscular, less muscular.

The gym seems to draw a steady stream of people. And not just men. My gaze lingers on a group of women laughing as they walk inside. Honestly, I've always thought boxing was mostly men willingly trying to give each other concussions.

"Maybe I should join too." Tess grins as she pushes back her chair. "Purely for research purposes, obviously."

"Obviously."

She kisses my cheek, stacks our empty glasses, and gets up. "Come on, then. Get writing, missy." Then she points at Fable. "You keep an eye on her."

Fable lies down right beside my table and gives a bark.

I stare at him. "Traitor."

Fable wags his tail happily and settles on the floor beside my chair as if he's taking his assignment very seriously.

With a sigh, I open my laptop. To my surprise, the words begin to flow almost immediately. They're not perfect. Far from it. Some sentences disappear as quickly as they appear. Others stay because I can't think of anything better.

After a while, a fresh cup of coffee appears. When it's empty, a second arrives, followed by a third.



Outside, the afternoon light slowly gives way to the warm glow of early evening. It's only when my phone starts vibrating that I snap out of it.

Shit.

I said I'd only be gone an hour or two. I quickly answer.

"Hey."

"So you are still alive. I've texted you a few times." Ruben's voice is friendly as always. "I was starting to wonder where you were."

My eyes dart to the clock in the corner of my screen. Six o'clock. Damn it.

"Sorry, I lost track of time."

"I noticed." He laughs softly. "I thought you were only going to see Tess for an hour or two."

An uneasy feeling settles in my stomach. "That was the plan."

"Of course." There's a brief silence. "I was just worried."

My fingers tighten around my phone. "You don't need to be."

"Maybe not." That same friendly tone again. "But when I came home to an empty house, I started wondering if you'd moved into After Words."

I give a faint smile. "It's not that bad."

"I think Tess sees more of you than I do these days."

It sounds like a joke, but it doesn't quite feel like one.

"I left Tess's a while ago." The lie slips out before I realize what I'm saying.

Why did I say that?

"Oh." His tone relaxes.

My gaze settles on the half-empty coffee cup beside my laptop. "I was running a few errands."

"I thought you might be." A short silence follows. "I haven't eaten yet. I was hoping we could eat together."

"Sorry."

"It's okay." His voice grows warmer again. "Will you be home soon?"

"I'm leaving now."

"Good. I'll wait for you, then."

"See you soon."

"Drive safely."

Once the call ends, I stare at the dark screen for a moment. The uneasy feeling in my chest refuses to go away.

With a sigh, I gather my things.

"I'm heading out!" I call toward the bar.

CHAPTER
Four

CALEB

By the time the last few people leave, every muscle in my body is protesting. The painkillers take the edge off, but that's about it. While Ethan puts away the last of the gloves, I look around the gym.

The opening was a success, at least judging by the number of sign-ups. Still, it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. More than half our new members want to get fitter, lose a few pounds, or hit a punching bag once a week to blow off steam. There's nothing wrong with that. Far from it. But that's not how you build champions. I want fighters. Talent. People willing to give everything once they step into the ring. People who stay on their feet when their bodies are begging them to stop. So far, I haven't seen much of that.

"You don't look very happy for someone who just had a successful opening. It went well, didn't it?"

"I expected more."

Ethan glances at the sign-up forms. "Dude, it's day one."

"I know, *dude*." If I hadn't known Ethan for years, I'd never be able to put up with him. "I'm going upstairs."

"No way. You've been awake since six this morning. You've taken three painkillers that could probably knock out a couple of elephants, and you've barely eaten." His gaze shifts across the street. "We're going for a drink."

I follow his gaze and frown. "At a fucking bookstore that serves alcohol?" I snort. "Not happening."

"That's exactly why we should go." He puts on his jacket. "Think of it as meeting the neighbors."

Not interested.

"I already know the neighbors."

"No, you know what the building looks like, and you've made a whole lot of assumptions, Cal. You should know better."

I make no move to follow him and head for the door to my apartment above the gym.

"This is getting a little sad."

I grin. "Says the guy who got kicked out last week for flirting with two women at once."

"That was a misunderstanding."

"They were sisters."

"Still a misunderstanding."

I shake my head. "See you tomorrow, Ethan."

"No, I mean it, Caleb." His voice grows a little more serious. "It's about time you got laid again."

I let out a dry laugh. "Strong argument."

"You haven't had any since Sienna." He shrugs. "And trust me, women who read are… incredible."

I raise an eyebrow. What the hell is he talking about? "Incredible?"

"There's a reason those *romantasy* books sell so well." A grin spreads across his face. "Those women have imaginations, and they want to try *everything*."

"You're impossible." But he's right. Since Sienna, every attempt at a one-night stand has ended in drama.

"That's not a no." He tosses my hoodie at me. I catch it out of reflex, and a sharp pain shoots through my side.

"Goddamn it, Ethan."

Ethan shakes his head, amused. "I'll take that as a yes." Before I can tell him what he can do with his yes, he's already pushing the door open.

The cool evening air fills my lungs as I step outside.

"One drink," I mutter.

"Yeah, *sure*."

I ignore him and cross the street. Up close, the place looks even stranger than I expected. Big windows. Bookshelves. Still, I can't deny the concept clearly works. The place is almost full. People chat with colorful cocktails in their hands, while others sit at tables with books, looking as if they've forgotten there's a world outside.

Ethan makes his way toward the bar, one of the few places with room left for two guys our size.

"Seriously," I mutter. "Who puts books and alcohol together?"

"A genius." The woman's voice catches me off guard, and I look up. A redheaded woman stands on the other side of the bar, drying glasses. "You have no idea what alcohol and a good book can do together." She grins and tosses the towel over her shoulder. "For sales, I mean. Before your mind goes anywhere else."

Beside me, Ethan bursts out laughing.

My attention stays on the woman behind the bar. She isn't trying to impress anyone. That alone makes her more interesting than half the women who walked through the doors of Iron & Edge today. Maybe Ethan has a point after all.

Maybe.

"A genius?" I ask.

"Obviously." She puts away a glass. "It's the only logical explanation." Her smile widens.

I find myself smiling back before I realize it. Interesting.

"You're the new neighbors." It isn't a question.

"That obvious?"

She points at our black hoodies, her gaze lingering on the Iron & Edge logo for a second. "Not at all." She reaches across the bar. "Tess."

"Caleb."

"Ethan." My best friend gives her his most practiced smile.

The corners of Tess's mouth lift. "Okay," she says, looking between us. "Now I understand why this place was suddenly so busy today."

Ethan presses a hand to his chest. "Finally, someone who recognizes talent."

"Easy." She laughs. "I meant the gym." She grins again. "What can I get you?" She slides two drinks menus toward us.

I open mine and frown.

Between the Covers
The Great Ginsby
Pride & Prosecco
Dark & Stormy.
A Court of Mint & Fury
The Night Citrus

I have no idea what half these drinks are. I read the menu a second time, then a third. It doesn't help.

"What's wrong with plain old beer?"

Tess looks up from the glass she's drying. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Back at the gym, apparently."

She lets out a soft laugh.

I close the menu. "Fine. You pick."

Tess raises an eyebrow and grins. "Then you're getting a Dark & Stormy. Seems to suit your personality." She winks at me.

I like her.

"I'll have a Between the Covers," Ethan says without looking at the menu.

"At least you're adventurous." She takes the menus back. We watch as she makes her way past the customers to the other end of the bar.

"This is officially my new favorite place," he says, his eyes still on Tess.

A dull thud comes from the stairs at the back of the café. Several people look up, and I automatically follow their gaze. A woman stands halfway down the staircase, loose papers, pens, and a notebook scattered across the wooden steps. More pages flutter to the floor.

Ethan grins. "Looks like your type."

I look at the chaos unfolding on the stairs. Dark hair, way too many papers, and someone desperately trying to gather everything up. I turn back to Ethan. "Why?"

"She looks like trouble."

"Keep it up, Ethan, and you'll be looking for another job."

He just laughs.

I don't wait for a response and head toward the stairs. By the time I reach the bottom step, the woman is crouching in a sea of loose pages.

"Here." I pick up a few sheets and hold them out to her.

Her fingers freeze around the pages. Strange. It's only when she looks up that I understand why. Green eyes, a surprised expression, and suddenly I know exactly where I've seen her before. The drive-in. For a few seconds, she just stares at me.

What are the odds?

"You clearly have a talent for dramatic introductions."

Her cheeks turn pink. "That—that wasn't the plan."

"Sure."

She lets out a quiet sigh and snatches up another page before I can reach it.

"You're still alive," she says at last.

My hand moves to my side automatically. "Nothing gets past you, does it?"

"You didn't exactly make it difficult." Her gaze lingers for a second on the spot where my T-shirt stretches over the bruise. "Honestly, I thought you were going to ignore my advice."

"I did."

This time, she actually smiles. A moment later, Tess appears beside us with a tray in her hands.

"Ava, are you okay?" Her gaze moves over the papers still scattered across the stairs. "How many times have I told you to be careful? When you get lost in those stories of yours—"

Stories?

My gaze settles on the notebook she's clutching a little too tightly to her chest.

"Caleb," Tess says, giving me a quick nod. "This is Ava, my best friend and a future bestselling author who'll soon be far too famous to have time for me."

"Drama queen," Ava mutters.

"Ava, this is Caleb. Our neighbor from across the street. I'm sure you'll be seeing plenty of each other. Ava practically lives here."

Ava barely seems to register that Tess has just introduced us. "Hi. Okay, I really have to go."

Before either of us can answer, she turns toward the exit. The dog appears out of nowhere again and nudges her hand with his nose.

Ava automatically scratches behind his ears. "Behave yourself, okay?"

The dog wags his tail enthusiastically.

"He only listens when he feels like it," Tess says dryly.

"Just like his owner."

"Excuse me?"

A smile tugs at Ava's lips. "Love you, Tess." Then she pushes the door open and disappears outside.

My gaze stays on the closed door a second longer than it needs to. Then I return to my seat at the bar and reach for the drink Tess has set down for me.

"Interesting."

"Shut up."

Ethan grins. "A woman who doesn't fall at your feet the moment she sees you. That's not something you see every day."

"Ethan."

"In fact, she literally walked away from you."

"Shut. Your. Mouth."

His grin only widens.

CHAPTER
Five

AVA

The supermarket parking lot is almost empty when I pull into a space between two other cars.

Still, I sit there for a moment after turning off the engine. My hands rest on the steering wheel as I stare at nothing in particular. Caleb.

Of all the places I could have run into him again, After Words was probably the last one I expected. The owner of Iron & Edge. I can't help laughing.

My thoughts drift back to the stairs.

To the papers scattered everywhere, the way he recognized me, and the fact that I practically ran away afterward.

I lean my head back against the seat. What are the odds?

Apparently, higher than zero.

With a sigh, I get out and head into the supermarket.

It takes me less than five minutes to find something quick to make for dinner. Pasta, a jar of sauce, and garlic bread go into my basket as my mind starts wandering again.

It's almost eight, much later than I planned, and that thought alone ties my stomach in knots.

Not because Ruben will be angry. That's rarely his first reaction. No, he'll give me that calm, understanding look and say, *You're pushing yourself too hard again, Ava. There's more to life than writing.*

And before I know it, I'll be wondering if he's right.

My fingers tighten around the basket handle.

I should have sent him a message. It barely takes a minute.

He's only worried about me.

The thought makes sense.

So much sense that it takes me a few seconds to realize I'm justifying myself again.

I stop in the middle of the parking lot.

Why am I doing that?

I was with Tess. Exactly where I said I'd be. I haven't done anything wrong.

Yet I'm already going over which explanation sounds most believable.

On the way home, I try to convince myself I'm making a big deal out

of nothing. It's ridiculous. I stayed out a few hours longer than planned. There's nothing wrong with that. My gaze settles on the lit windows of the house as I automatically repeat the excuses I came up with on the drive.

The supermarket was busier than expected.

I still had to pick up groceries.

I lost track of time.

When I finally open the front door, Ruben is sitting at the kitchen table with his laptop open. His attention shifts from the screen to the grocery bag in my hand.

"There you are, finally."

"Sorry, the supermarket was busier than expected." The lie slips effortlessly off my tongue. Before I've even closed the door behind me, I'm wondering why I said it at all.

Ruben just nods. "No problem." He closes his laptop.

The tension that crept between my shoulder blades on the drive eases a little.

"I'll get started on dinner right away, okay?"

Before he can answer, I set the bag on the counter and start unpacking.

"It won't take long. I picked up something quick."

"You don't have to rush."

Ruben says nothing as I lower the pasta into the boiling water and heat the sauce. He stays at the kitchen table, his fingers resting loosely around his wineglass, silently watching every move I make.

"How was your day?" I ask as he takes a sip of wine. "Any interesting students in your lecture hall today?"

He lets out a short laugh. "This generation is hopeless. I give up."

Now I laugh too. "You say that every year, but you keep teaching."

"Apparently, I enjoy torturing myself."

"That does explain a lot."

He laughs softly and shakes his head. For a few seconds, we continue eating in silence. It should feel awkward. With us, it doesn't.

"So?" he asks at last. "How was your day?"

I take a sip of water. "Good."

"Did you see Tess?"

My fingers briefly tighten around my glass. "Yes."

"She always knows how to get you caught up in her excitement."

"It's not that bad."

"You think?" He refills my glass. "So? Did you write?"

It should be a simple question, but it doesn't feel like one.

"A little."

He takes a sip of wine. "There you go."

I frown. “What?”

“Sometimes you make it harder than it needs to be.” One corner of his mouth lifts slightly. “You’re always searching for the perfect idea, the perfect story, the perfect opening line.”

My gaze drops to my plate. “That’s my job.”

“I know.” His voice stays gentle. “I miss the Ava who used to come home excited after writing.”

I say nothing.

“When was the last time I heard you talk about a book you were excited about?”

The question hangs between us.

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is?”

“You know it’s a process—”

Of all people, Ruben should understand. He teaches literature. He spends his life surrounded by stories. Yet suddenly, it feels as if we’re speaking different languages. “You know why I want to write. I want to help people with my words.”

He looks at me without speaking for a few seconds.

Then he gives an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

“You write fiction, Ava.”

Irritation shoots through me. “Even fiction has truth in it.”

“I’m not denying that.”

“It sounds like you are.”

I stand before he can say anything else. My fingers grip my plate a little too tightly as I carry it into the kitchen. Once I turn on the tap, I set the dishes in the sink harder than necessary.

Ruben appears in the doorway. He takes a sip of wine and leans casually against the doorframe.

“Don’t be upset, sweetheart.”

I focus on the dishes in the sink and pretend I haven’t heard him. For a few seconds, everything is quiet.

Then I hear the soft clink of his glass being set on the counter. Before I can react, his arms wrap around my waist. His chin rests against my shoulder. “Come on.” He presses a kiss to my neck. “I really don’t mean anything by it, sweetheart.”

“Maybe not.” I keep my eyes on the dishes. “But that doesn’t make it hurt any less.”

He says nothing for a few moments.

“Listen, sweetheart.”

Before I can answer, his hand slides gently along my arm. He carefully

turns me toward him. “Ava, I mean well.”

He lowers his head and kisses me softly.

I want to stay angry, but the tension slowly leaves my shoulders. I sigh against his lips and relax a little. “I know.”

“Don’t forget that. I always mean well.”

Another kiss.

Another gentle touch.

His hand moves slowly along my side, and the familiar warmth of his body pushes my unease into the background.

I close my eyes for a moment.

Why am I getting so worked up?

“How about we go away this weekend?” he whispers in my ear. “Just the two of us.”

I look him in the eye. “Go away?”

“Mm.” His thumb traces small circles on my hip. “A little hotel somewhere. The coast. A city. I don’t mind.”

A smile tugs at my lips. “That sounds suspiciously romantic.”

“That’s the idea.”

For the first time that evening, I really laugh.

The rest of the evening is surprisingly peaceful.

Ruben doesn’t bring up my manuscript again, and I’m grateful enough to leave the subject alone too. Instead, we talk about his students, a new exhibition opening soon in Boston, and the endless question of where we could go this weekend.

By the time we head upstairs, I’ve promised to look into it tomorrow. For one evening, I decide not to reach for my laptop again. I focus on him. On us. On everything that has felt familiar for years.



When I wake up the next morning, Ruben has already left. His classes start early, and he likes to leave even earlier to meet with students who supposedly have urgent questions.

Outside, gray rain clouds hang over the city. Raindrops tap against the window as I sit down at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee. After Words doesn’t open until the afternoon today. For the first time in weeks, my mind doesn’t feel completely blank.

My laptop hasn't been open for five minutes when my phone starts vibrating.

Eleanor.

I can't keep avoiding her.

"Good morning," I say as innocently as possible.

"Please tell me you've been writing."

"Good morning, Ava. How are you? I'm good, thank you, Eleanor. So nice of you to ask."

"That sarcasm sounds a lot more promising than the silence of the past few weeks." She sounds relieved. "And before you ignore me for another three weeks, you're having brunch with me."

My eyes linger on the document still open on my screen. "It hasn't been that bad, has it?"

"You haven't answered my calls or emails in three weeks, Ava."

She has a point.

"The café next to Willow & Reed. In an hour."

I glance at the rain outside. I'm not exactly eager to go out in it. "You're not even going to ask if I'm free?"

"No." Her answer is immediate. "Because if I do, you'll come up with another excuse."

"In an hour, then."

"Perfect. We'll discuss your manuscript before Margaret decides I'm not doing my job."

When the call ends, I stare at my laptop screen for a moment.

It isn't much. Probably not even enough for Eleanor to judge whether it's any good, but it's a start. I finish my coffee, print out the manuscript, close my laptop, and get up. If I wait much longer, Eleanor will show up at my door herself.

By the time I push open the café door, I'm half-soaked. Apparently, the weather gods decided a fifteen-foot walk was more than enough to give me a free shower.

A bell rings above my head, and warm air hits my face. I spot Eleanor almost immediately. She's sitting by a window at the back, a cup of coffee in front of her and a tablet beside her plate. Before I can greet her, she looks up. "Ava. Honey, you're soaked."

I take off my coat and pull out the chair opposite her. "The heavens opened the second I got out of my car."

Eleanor laughs. She waves over the waiter, who knows what to do without being told. Clearly, she comes here often. I've barely sat down before a lovely hot cup of coffee appears in front of me.

"Thank you," I say to him with a smile. A few seconds later, I set a stack of printed pages in front of Eleanor.

For the first time since I've known her, she actually seems speechless. "What's that?"

"A manuscript."

"I can see that." She picks up the first page as if she can't quite believe it's real. "How many words?"

"Almost ten thousand."

Her eyes dart to the title page, then back to me. "Ten thousand?" She leans back in her chair. "For three weeks, you haven't answered a single email, picked up a single call, or sent me a single chapter."

"Correct."

"And now you walk in here with ten thousand words?"

"Also correct."

"Okay."

That's all she says. *Okay.*

But after years of working together, I know exactly what it means. She has hope.

She carefully turns to the first page.

Meanwhile, the waiter who brought my coffee sets two plates of sandwiches in front of us.

Eleanor barely seems to notice. She's completely absorbed in the manuscript, her gaze moving from one page to the next.

I try to occupy myself with my coffee. That lasts about two minutes. "You know a lot of this could still change," I finally say.

Without looking up, Eleanor raises a finger.

I immediately close my mouth again. Rain keeps tapping against the window as people come and go around us.

None of it seems to reach Eleanor. Every so often, she frowns. Sometimes she shakes her head, and once she mutters something that sounds suspiciously like, *No. No, I wouldn't do that.*

I have no idea which part she's talking about.

Time crawls by, and my nerves only get worse. One sandwich disappears, followed by another, without her attention leaving the pages for even a second.

"Say something."

"I'm surprised."

My stomach drops. "That doesn't sound very positive."

"I wasn't finished." She taps her fingertips against the manuscript. "For three weeks, you've ignored my calls, my emails, and pretty much my entire existence. I was convinced I'd get another excuse today."

My stomach twists. *Shit, shit, SHIT.* She doesn't like it. "Eleanor—"

"And then you give me this." She slowly shakes her head. "I expected you to come back with fantasy. Maybe a new idea. Another world, a dragon or two."

I can't help grinning. "A dragon or two?"

"You know what I mean." Her gaze returns to the manuscript. "I'm almost grateful you've set fantasy aside for this."

My heart gives a little leap. That's probably as close to a compliment as Eleanor will ever get.

Then her eyes narrow. "But now for the important question."

Here it comes.

"And what's that?"

"Please tell me that mysterious stranger is based on a real man."

I almost choke on my coffee. "That man isn't what the story is about, Eleanor."

She laughs. "No, of course not." I can tell from her face that she doesn't believe me for a second. "But Ava…" She taps the manuscript. "This is gold."

My fingers tighten around my coffee cup.

"Whatever—or whoever—gave you this inspiration, it's working." Her gaze returns to the stack of pages. "Keep this up." All humor leaves her voice. "No second-guessing yourself. No going back to rewrite before you've finished. And no deleting three chapters because you think they aren't good enough."

I open my mouth.

She raises a finger. "See? That's exactly what I mean."

I can't help laughing. "Eleanor—"

"No." She shakes her head. "Listen to me." Her hand rests on the manuscript. "If the rest of this story is as good as these first ten thousand words, you've got something special here."

My smile slowly fades. "Do you really think so?"

"Yes."

No hesitation. No qualifications. Just *yes*.

"In fact," she adds with a satisfied smile, "I think this could be a bestseller."

My gaze drops to the manuscript between us. Three weeks ago, I hadn't written a word. Now all I can do is hope Eleanor is right.

CHAPTER Six

CALEB

The steady rhythm of my fists hitting the punching bag fills the empty gym as rain taps against the tall windows.

The bag swings away and comes straight back. I automatically meet it with another punch. After all these years, I don't have to think about it anymore. My body knows the rhythm better than my mind does.

Ethan calls it stubbornness that I'm always in the gym at seven in the morning. I call it common sense.

There aren't many places where no one expects anything from me. Iron & Edge is one of them. That's why I came to Ashford in the first place. Not for the city or the surrounding area, and definitely not for the endless rain that apparently falls nine months out of the year. No one knows who I was before I came here. Ashford has given me something I haven't had in a long time: peace.

The gym is nowhere near finished, and there are still a hundred things that could be better. But Iron & Edge finally feels like more than an idea. For the first time in a long while, I feel like I'm building something instead of constantly trying to catch up.

My phone vibrates somewhere on the desk. I ignore it, but a few seconds later, it vibrates again. Then once more. With a sigh, I finally walk over and find three missed calls.

Mason.

My hand rests on the phone for a moment. A normal person would be worried.

Mostly, I'm wondering what problem I'll have to fix this time. Before I can decide whether to call him back, a new message appears on my screen.

Mason
Pick Up.

I stare at the words for a few seconds. Then I lock my phone again.

The gym's front door swings open, and a gust of cold air follows Ethan inside. He gives me a quick nod, tosses his gym bag into a corner, and starts wrapping his hands without saying much.

That's one of the reasons we've worked together for years. Not every-

thing needs to be a conversation. A few minutes later, we're facing each other in the ring. Ethan catches my first combination on the focus pads. Then another. And another. The rhythm feels familiar.

"I got three more sign-ups for those self-defense classes yesterday."

I hit the pad again. "Good."

"Apparently, people have suddenly started caring about their own safety."

"Miracles do happen."

Ethan grins. "Maybe I should add a second session."

I shrug. "If the first one's full, go ahead."

He catches another series of punches. "Maybe we can talk that redhead across the street into joining too."

I ignore the comment. She's the last thing on my mind right now. I need to focus on what matters. "Ethan."

"Mm?"

"Have you got a new time?"

He pretends not to understand. "For the classes?"

I look at him.

He lets out an exaggerated sigh.

"You know what I mean."

No answer.

Ethan shifts his weight. "Have you seen that writer again, by the way?"

Here we go again.

"Ethan."

"What?"

"The time for the next fight."

He tries to hide his smile. "I think they're both single."

My next punch hits the pad hard enough to knock his arms back.

"Fuck!"

I keep going, hook an arm behind his neck, turn my hip, and sweep his front leg out from under him.

Ethan hits the mat with a dull thud. "Jesus Christ, Caleb!"

I look down at him. "You know you need to stay focused."

He swears again.

"Even when you're holding the pads."

"You're an asshole."

"Yep. Now tell me the time."

Ethan lets his head fall back against the mat and sighs. "All right. This Friday. Eleven."

Perfect. I need to come up with twenty-five thousand dollars by the end of the month, so the sooner I have another fight, the better.

"She's not single, by the way," I add.

Ethan rubs the spot where he hit the mat. He immediately knows who I mean.

"So don't bother."

In one smooth movement, he rolls backward and springs to his feet. "Like that's ever stopped us."

I look at him. "Ethan."

He sighs dramatically. "Relax. I don't mean her."

"Good. We came to Ashford to get away from all that shit. I'm not getting involved with a married woman, and neither are you."

I keep my eyes on him.

Ethan holds my gaze for a second before shrugging. "No worries." A grin spreads across his face. "I'm more interested in the redhead."

I shake my head. "Of course you are."

"What?" He raises the focus pads again. "She's a challenge."

"That's one way to describe her."

Ethan ignores me completely. "Speaking of the redhead, I'm getting a little hungry."

My gaze snaps to him. "Not happening."

"You don't even know what I was going to suggest."

"Yes, I do."

"And?"

I toss the hand wraps into the trash. "No."

Ethan grins. "You're getting predictable."

"And you're annoying."

"Perfect. Glad we agree."

A few minutes later, I'm putting on my jacket anyway, and we leave the gym. Ethan slips his hands into his pockets as we head toward the bar. The rain has stopped, but the sky above us is still heavy and dark.

My phone starts vibrating again. Mason. Again. I sigh and look at Ethan. "I'll be there in a minute. Go ahead—"

"No backing out."

I flip him off.

He laughs and keeps walking, leaving me alone on the sidewalk.

"Yeah, Mason."

There's silence on the other end for a few seconds.

Already a bad sign.

"Mason," I say again.

"I'm in a clinic."

I close my eyes. "What? What did you—"

"Rehab."

My free hand goes to my face, and I press two fingers against my eyes. "How did that happen?"

"I got caught."

My stomach twists. "Caught? I thought you were clean?"

Silence again.

"Goddamn it, Mason."

"I know."

"No, apparently you don't." The words come out harsher than I intended.

He lets out an audible breath. "Sorry."

I close my eyes again. "Explain."

"It's not that simple."

"Try anyway."

"There were four of us."

My hand automatically curls into a fist. "Mason."

The street around me suddenly seems much quieter.

"Since it's my first offense on record…" He trails off. "They gave me a choice." His voice sounds smaller than usual. "Check myself into rehab or go to jail."

I tip my head back.

Now I'm the one who says nothing.

"You have to get me out of here, Cal. I can't handle—"

I shake my head. "No, Mason. I think rehab is exactly where you need to be." There's silence on the other end. "Get clean."

"Cal—"

"Get. Clean."

I can't bail him out again.

"You need to start thinking about your future."

A humorless laugh comes through the phone. "What future?"

I don't have an answer, and maybe that's the worst part. Because a few years ago, Mason had one. A damn good one, too. My gaze settles on the other side of the street. "You're smart enough to become a doctor. Smart enough to get through medical school. Don't tell me you don't have a future."

The silence that follows says enough.

"Mason?"

He sighs heavily. "I fucked it up."

I close my eyes. "You did."

It's all I can say right now.

His breath catches.

"Mason, that doesn't mean it's over."

There's silence on the other end again.

"Get clean, Mason. Do what they ask. Stay as long as you need to."

"Cal—"

"And when you get out, you start again."

He lets out a humorless laugh. "It's not that simple."

"No." We agree on that. "Nothing about your life has been simple these past few years."

My grip tightens around my phone.

"But you're not dead." The silence that follows lasts a long time. "So stop acting like it's all over."

For a few more seconds, he says nothing. "Okay."

That one word sounds more defeated than anything he's said so far.

I close my eyes. "Mason."

"Yeah?"

"Stay there."

There's another pause. For a moment, I wonder if he's still on the line.

"Okay," he says at last.

"And Mason—don't do anything stupid."

A short laugh comes from the other end. "Bit late for that advice."

"Just get clean." Then I end the call.

I stay outside for a few more seconds, tilting my head back to look at the gray sky above Ashford. The rain has stopped. Unfortunately, the rest of my problems haven't.

With a sigh, I finally push open the door to After Words. The bar is much quieter than yesterday. The lunchtime crowd has given way to a handful of customers scattered around the place.

I spot Ethan almost immediately. He's sitting at the bar… next to Tess. She's gesturing enthusiastically as she explains something that's probably about books. To my surprise, he actually seems to be listening, nodding every now and then.

When he looks up and sees me, his grin disappears. "Everything okay?"

I shake my head.

I take a few steps toward the bar. Or at least, I try to.

Halfway there, something blocks my path. A brown dog sits down right in front of my feet, his blue eyes fixed on me. I've never seen eyes that blue on a dog. I look down. He looks back.

"Right." The dog. I forgot about him.

I step to one side, and he moves with me. I try the other side. Same result. An amused sigh comes from behind the bar.

"Don't bother."

My gaze snaps to Tess.

She takes a sip of coffee. “Our friend Fable has decided he wants attention.”

I look back at the dog. “And if I say no?”

“Then you’ll probably be standing there until closing.”

Ethan snorts with laughter.

The dog keeps staring at me, completely unfazed.

“This is ridiculous.”

“Welcome to my world,” Tess says.

The dog—Fable—wags his tail as if he knows we’re talking about him. I have nothing against dogs. Quite the opposite. But I’m not the kind of guy who sits on the floor talking to them in a baby voice, either. Still, there’s something about him.

With a sigh, I roll my eyes and crouch until we’re roughly at eye level. “Happy now?”

He tilts his head as I reach out and scratch behind his ears. His tail starts wagging harder. Fable gets up, gives my hand one last nudge with his nose, and apparently decides I’ve passed his inspection. Only then does he move out of the way.

“See?” Tess says. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

I stand. “Who’s actually in charge here? You or the dog?”

Tess opens her mouth, but before she can answer, Fable barks once.

I look at the dog. He looks back.

“That settles it.” I shake my head and take a seat at the bar while Fable happily retreats with his toy. My phone stays in my hand. The screen has gone dark, but my gaze keeps drifting back to it.

Mason. How could he be so fucking stupid? A few months ago, things finally seemed to be heading in the right direction. He was studying again. Making plans again. For the first time in a year, he was talking about clinical placements and exams instead of debts and problems. And now this. Across the bar, the conversation carries on as if the world hasn’t just found another way to kick me in the shins.

Tess leans her elbows on the wooden counter while Ethan explains how the self-defense classes work. At first, she seems to be listening mostly out of politeness, but as the conversation goes on, she starts asking more questions. How many classes are there? How big are the groups? Do you have to be fit? Ethan answers them all with surprising patience.

“What if someone knows absolutely nothing about martial arts?”

“We have beginner classes. We teach everything from scratch.”

Tess nods slowly.

“Just sign up and see for yourself.”

“I don’t have time for that.”

"Everyone says that."

"You can always book private lessons, too," Ethan adds.

Tess raises an eyebrow. "Private lessons?"

"One-on-one. You learn faster."

"That sounds expensive."

He gives her a small grin and leans closer. "I'm sure we can work something out."

Tess lets out a quiet laugh. "Yeah, I bet we can."

Before Ethan can answer, a woman at a nearby table catches her attention. "Give me a second." She grabs a notepad from behind the bar and heads over to the customer.

The silence she leaves behind lasts only a few seconds.

"So," Ethan says, swirling the beer in his glass. "What's going on?"

I keep my gaze on the bar. "Nothing."

"Bullshit."

I don't respond.

Ethan has known me long enough to recognize when he needs to keep pushing. Apparently, this is one of those times. "Was it Mason?"

My jaw automatically tightens.

"Caleb—"

"Drop it." My voice comes out sharper than intended.

Ethan says nothing more.

When Tess returns a few minutes later with a page full of orders, she looks from him to me. "Everything okay?"

My gaze stays on my phone. "Yeah," I say shortly.

The silence lasts a little too long.

Tess glances at Ethan and gives a small nod. "Okay…" She sets down the page. "One Darcy Macchiato, two Chai-pters, and—"

"Sorry." The word leaves my mouth before I realize it.

Her eyebrows lift.

"I'm just having a bad day."

The tension in her shoulders immediately eases. "It happens."

I slowly breathe out and get up from my stool. "Where's the restroom?"

Tess points toward the stairs at the back. "Upstairs, at the end of the hallway."

"Thanks."

She goes back to her list of orders, full of names that sound more like book titles than drinks. Normally, I'd probably make a comment, but today I don't have the energy.

My eyes meet Ethan's. He says nothing. For once, he doesn't keep

digging for answers I won't give him anyway. I'm grateful for that. Today, I simply don't have the energy to take on another problem.

The stairs creak softly under my weight as I head upstairs, where it's surprisingly quiet. The chatter from the bar almost disappears as I reach the top step, replaced by the soft tapping of keyboards and rustling of paper. A few tables are occupied, but no one seems particularly interested in the people around them.

My gaze settles on the table by the window. Ava. Her laptop is open in front of her, and loose pages cover the tabletop beside a coffee cup that looks like it's been empty for a while.

She hasn't noticed me. Her attention is entirely on the screen as she types something, deletes it, and starts again. She repeats the whole routine once more before leaning back in obvious frustration and running both hands through her hair.

She looks like she's losing a fight with herself.

No wonder she looked ready to strangle someone at the drive-in, though I suspect I was at the top of that list.

She keeps typing. A sentence appears on the screen, then disappears again. I walk farther into the room.

"Looks frustrating."

Ava visibly startles, her fingers hitting the wrong keys as her head snaps up. "Goddamn it."

One corner of my mouth lifts. "That answers my question."

She presses a hand to her chest and gives me a look that confirms I'm still high on that list. "Don't you have anything better to do than keep scaring the hell out of me?"

"Probably." I pull out a chair and sit without waiting for an invitation. "But this looked more interesting."

Her eyes narrow. "You find bothering people interesting?"

"Only when they're this welcoming."

She makes a sound suspiciously close to a stifled groan.

Then she turns back to her screen. Or tries to, at least.

Less than a minute later, another whole paragraph disappears. Ava stares at the screen for a few seconds before taking her hands off the keyboard. "If you have something to say, just say it. Then leave me alone."

"Why would I have something to say?"

"Because you've been staring at my screen for five minutes."

"Now you're exaggerating."

She glares at me.

"Four minutes. Tops," I joke.

Finally, she pushes back her chair. "You're so annoying." With one last warning look, she turns and heads toward the hallway at the back.

I'm left alone at the table. My gaze drifts absently over the pages scattered across it. I should probably just go to the restroom, since that's supposedly why I came upstairs. I probably shouldn't be looking at her work, either. But a passage at the top of one page catches my attention. Before I know it, I'm reading the first sentence.

My coworker can go to hell.

That's my first thought when I try his number for the third time and get his voicemail again. The carpool lot is deserted except for three cars, my night shift starts in twenty minutes, and the next bus doesn't leave for another hour. I open the Uber app and swear when I see the wait time.

He's going to regret this.

I start figuring out how to get to work on time and get even with him, but a sound interrupts me.

Muffled swearing from somewhere between the parked cars stops my thoughts in their tracks. The sensible choice would be to walk away, call a cab, and leave it at that. I know what happens to people who investigate strange noises in deserted parking lots. It happens in literally every horror movie. But apparently, sensible is one thing I'm not. Curiosity wins, and I head toward the sound with my hand in my work bag, gripping my deodorant spray. You never know, right?

I follow the muffled swearing behind an old billboard and find a man leaning against a motorcycle, one hand pressed to his side. Even in the dim light, I can see what's wrong.

The stranger turns when he hears me, and I immediately step back when I notice the weapon in his hand. His gaze moves slowly over me.

I really should run now. "You're bleeding."